

THE Association AGENDA

PUBLISHED BY THE CANADIAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES Editor Bob Hamp Email: b.hamp@csae.com

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I Found the Future in Manure!

Earlier this summer, I was invited by a western fertilizer company to be the dinner speaker at their annual golf day. In attendance would be several hundred farmers, their families, and various folks from throughout the local area, in a small town about 100 miles from the nearest city. It was about as rural as you could get.

I was asked to take a look at "what comes next" in the world of agriculture, and was advised that this particular community of farmers was extremely progressive, and always kept an open mind to the trends affecting their industry.

I spent a great deal of time preparing a highly customized talk that took a look at some of the unique challenges facing agriculture today, as well as the trends that will impact the industry through the next five, ten and twenty years. I was well prepared with all kinds of interesting insight that some people might not be aware of; for example, the observation that China is now the world's largest grower of wheat.

While doing my research, I came across the phrase "manure management." That was a new one for me! And the deeper I dug, so to speak, the more I came to realize that we can learn a great deal as to where we are headed in the future by taking a look at what is going on with manure.

I believe that there are some extremely important lessons here that every association executive needs to think about as you continue to try to prepare your members for "what comes next."

Massive, rapid change

I'm a big believer that we are now living in a period of time that involves the fastest rate of change to have ever occurred, and that the pace of change is speeding up. To survive and thrive, we must understand the trends that are occurring all around us, assess how they might impact us, and learn what we need to do to turn these changes from challenges into opportunities.

Your members are going to be faced with a world that involves far greater skills specialization than they've ever seen before. They'll increasingly have to hire experts to get the job done; they are going to be impacted by rapidly evolving science; they'll have to innovate to find new sources of revenue; and they'll have to work with leading edge methods for business and process transformation to continue to hammer out the excess costs within the organization they work for. That's where the world of manure comes in: what's going on in this industry is but a microcosm of some of the big trends that are going to affect your members in the future.

Specialization and generalization

You probably never knew that there are folks out there who carry the title "manure manager" on their business cards. Neither did I.

The fact is, there is an entire industry of folks who possess the specialized knowledge, innovative mindset and deep insight into the world of manure. That's because the potential of what can be done with manure today has expanded significantly through the last several years, to such a degree that the typical farmer can no longer be expected to know everything there is to know.

The manure manager is a partner to the farmer, providing them the very specialized, niche oriented knowledge that they have developed.

That is indicative of a trend occurring everywhere. There is so much new knowledge emerging around us, every profession and career is fragmenting into hundreds and thousands of sub-specialties. No one individual can be expected to master everything anymore; instead, they'll be responsible for some type of core responsibility (as does a farmer) and will spend their time working with the required subject experts (such as manure managers, among many other specialists.)

In essence, we are becoming a world subdivided into the generalists, and the specialists.

Are you preparing your members for this trend? Do you have a plan that provides for the appropriate education and motivation for a world in which they will find themselves focusing on ever smaller niches of knowledge, or in which they will be forced to choose to become a generalist? Do you know how your association base will evolve as the world of generalists/specialists continues to evolve?

If you aren't, you'd better be thinking about this now.

The impact of the rapid evolution of science

I came to learn that on many farms, one of the biggest manure management problems happens to involve what is known as "pit crust."

As the name suggests, it's the top layer of the manure in the pit, and it gets rather hard and crusty. All farms have a pit - something has to be done with the waste generated by the animals. And recent scientific research shows that the thicker the crust, the greater the number of flies and rodents, not to mention enhanced smell problems.

This aspect of manure management has always been a big problem, and the world of bio-genetics is out to fix it.

Scientists at a company called AgTech Products have learned, through detailed research, that most of the pit crust on the manure comes from the outer shell of the corn that is fed to the animals. (I bet you didn't know that!) Their solution was to develop a specialized bio-enzyme that would break down the corn shell during the digestion process, with the result that the pit crust could become dramatically thinner. The result has been fewer rodents and flies, less potential for disease, and a big, positive environmental impact.

Bio-science is affecting agriculture in a huge way, as our many other aspects of science. The result is that what farmers need to know to better manage some of the unique problems on their farm is increasing exponentially; the pit crust problem and potential solution is but one small area of science that is part of a larger picture. And given that there is so much new stuff going on, the typical farmer might not become aware of this type of product.

That's where the manure manager comes in - they are individuals who possess the specialized skills of knowing "what's out there," and "what can be done with it." They are partners to the process, helping the farmers cope with the rapid rate of change that is swirling around them.

Who are the "partners to the process" in your association base? Do they have a voice within the membership? Often, these are the folks who truly understand how your own association industry or profession will evolve, insight into the very specialized trends affecting your future, and the innovative mindset to know how to apply solutions. It is critical that they have the opportunity to share their insight and observations, because they will help to wake your own members up to the changes swirling around them.

"Running the business better"

Which brings me to the next trend with sophisticated manure management - these experts are also figuring out how to provide farmers with significant revenue enhancement, through the more intelligent application of manure on the fields.

Manure is often used as a nutrient on the farm, and farmers deal with very complex methods of determining how much nutrient is needed for each particular crop, on a certain type of soil, in a

certain type of location.

That's where we are seeing some of the most far-reaching aspects of manure management. In one area in the Midwest, a group of manure management experts have been working with local farmers to undertake very detailed soil and yield analysis, to determine the best application rates for future plantings. The returns have been significant - one family farm saw a \$19 increase in revenue yield per acre through such efforts. That might seem like a small number until you multiply it by 2,000 acres, for a net result of \$38,000, a big revenue improvement for a family farm operation.

This is part of a larger trend called "precision farming," which involves a very sophisticated marriage of leading edge technologies with the planting process. In precision farming, a farm tractor uses GPS receivers to link to a satellite in order to determine its exact position. It then uses sophisticated yield analysis techniques, often with the involvement of the manure management consultant, to determine exactly what needs to go in the ground in terms of seed and fertilizer, in order to produce a better crop at that exact spot.

Precision-farming today is still somewhat in its infancy; every farmer is aware of it, many are experimenting with it, and a few have adopted it with passion. What's important here is that similar trends are evolving in every industry and profession; as the body of knowledge that surrounds us grows, there are always all kinds of innovative, new and challenging ways to "run the business better."

Are such stories shared through your association base? Do you spend time at your annual conferences and within your publication talking about some of the more radical developments that are set to shake things up? If not, you should be thinking about doing so, because often it's the far-fetched ideas which eventually take hold and cause significant change.

Turning problems into opportunity

Then there are farmers who are turning manure into money!

Down in Vermont, there's a program underway in which they are innovating with a variety of methods to turn manure into electricity. The incentive? The farmers are paid four cents a kilowatt hour above the market rate, as part of a state drive to find alternative energy sources. They are doing so with the help of engineering and electrical specialists - and local manure managers who understand everything they need to know to deal with this unique fuel-source substance and maximize its output.

They're at the forefront of innovation, finding new solutions to difficult problems.

Which leads to the question -- who are the innovation leaders in your association base? Are their ideas embraced and shared, or has the collective culture of your group pushed them to the sidelines? Do you discuss the offbeat, innovative things occurring within your association base, or do you prefer to cover off the same-old, same-old each and every year?

It's a good question - and my observation of many associations is that they continue to forge away on the small, minute problems of today, without looking at some of the more unique trends and opportunities that are occurring all around them.

Ongoing, massive career and skill fragmentation

What do these "manure managers" really do? They excel in focusing on a very specific niche. They understand the rapid evolution of knowledge, methodology and innovation occurring in that field, and make their expertise available to a huge industry.

I believe that this is the type of trend that you will see occurring throughout your own association base. As our world becomes so complex and challenging, you will find an ever-increasing degree of career specialization. In essence, you will discover that you have your own manure-managers out there, each of them concentrating on some small aspect of your overall industry or profession.

Who are they? What do they do? What is their role? What does it indicate about the future of your association? If you begin finding them, and asking questions about what their existence implies, you'll

have a good idea as to how your future might evolve, and what might come next.

What comes next? - Start looking forward!

That, in a nutshell, is a key point. Do you and your members truly understand "what comes next?" I think in a lot of industries and associations, the answer is "no."

People need to start thinking about the future again. Not a future that comes in the next few weeks or the next few months, or even what might come next year. People need to start thinking long term again; a type of thinking that seems to have come to an end in the last few years.

I'm convinced that too many people have been lulled into a false sense of complacency with respect to their career and skills, their company and their industry.

We need to change our frame of mind with respect to the change that is occurring in the world around us, and the trends that will present challenge and opportunity. I happen to believe that the pace of change in our world is going to increase, and will be relentless and unforgiving. I'm convinced that everything we know - the jobs we work in, the professions in which we have been trained, the skills we possess, the marketplace in which we sell our products, the industry in which we work, and the knowledge that we are expected to have mastered - will be extremely different tomorrow compared to where we are today.

I think there are good signs of where we are headed by the simple fact that there exists in the world a group of people who are proud to be recognized as "manure managers."

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a leading international futurist, trends & innovation expert. He spent much of the summer working on his book, "What I Learned From Frogs in Texas: Forward Thinking Innovation in a Time of Constant Change." The book is set for a late fall release. Jim provides keynotes, workshops and executive strategy sessions focused on trends, innovation and change; one of his most popular keynote topics is "What Comes Next? (And What Should You Do About It?"; as well as "How to Develop a Forward Thinking Organization." You can contact Jim at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com, and learn more about his presentations at www.jimcarroll.com



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